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U.S. Department of Education sent this bulletin at 01/16/2018 01:56 PM EST

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Jan. 16, 2018

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## Prepared Remarks by U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to the American Enterprise Institute

Following are the prepared remarks by U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to the American Enterprise Institute conference, "Bush-Obama School Reform: Lessons Learned," today in Washington.

Thank you, Rick, for that kind introduction. Who would've thought that after we were last together on a panel in Grand Rapids a couple of years ago, I'd be here in this capacity today?

It's an honor to be with all of you at an organization I have long appreciated. AEI is now in its 80th year and in that near century, the Institute's scholars have influenced and shaped the way Americans think about so many issues in the public square. AEI has been – and will continue to be – a treasured constant in this town of transition. And it should be noted that's due in no small part to the leadership of Arthur Brooks, who brings a unique and compelling perspective. I'm grateful to call him a friend.

I'd like to especially thank Rick and Michael for putting this volume together and for hosting today's important discussions. Both of you have contributed significantly to the policy debates in American education, and, importantly, you've put your distinct perspectives and experience to work with the goal of improving education for all. You both left the classroom out of frustration, and there are still far too many teachers who share that experience today.

My work over thirty years has revolved around time spent on the outside, looking in. Outside Washington. Outside the LBJ building. Outside "the system." Some have questioned the presence of an outsider in the Department of Education, but, as it's been said before, maybe what students need is someone who doesn't yet know all the things you "can't do."

To a casual observer, a classroom today looks scarcely different than what one looked like when I entered the public policy debate thirty years ago. Worse, most classrooms today look remarkably similar to those of 1938 when AEI was founded. Take a look at this! These two operating rooms look starkly different, as does this general store and this website. But these two classrooms look almost identical.

The vast majority of learning environments have remained the same since the industrial revolution, because they were made in its image. Think of your own experience: sit down; don't talk; eyes front. Wait for the bell. Walk to the next class. Repeat. Students were trained for the assembly line then, and they still are today.

Our societies and economies have moved beyond the industrial era. But the data tell us education hasn't.

The most recent Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, report, with which you are all familiar, has the U.S. ranked 23rd in reading, 25th in science and 40th in math. And, you know this too: it's not for a lack of funding. The fact is the United States spends more per pupil than most other developed countries, many of which perform better than us in the same surveys.

I know that hard truth touches a nerve for everyone in this room. It does so for educators who try to help their students realize their potential. For employers who seek prepared employees.

And, most importantly, for parents who only want the best for their children.

Of course there have been many attempts to change the status quo. We've seen valiant efforts to improve education from Republicans and Democrats, liberals, conservatives and everyone in between.

That's because everyone is aiming for the same result.

Everyone wants students to be prepared and to lead successful lives.

We can't say that sort of public harmony exists in other policy arenas. Not everyone agrees about the outcome or goal of tax policy or energy policy or immigration policy.

Our unity of purpose here presents an opportunity.

But while we've changed some aspects of education, the results we all work for and desire haven't been achieved.

The bottom line is simple: federal education reform efforts have not worked as hoped.

That's not a point I make lightly or joyfully. Yes, there have been some minor improvements in a few areas. But we're far from where we need to be. We need to be honest with ourselves. The purpose of today's conversation is to look at the past with 20/20 hindsight, examine what we have done and where it has – or hasn't – led us.

First, let me be clear that I'm not here to impugn anyone's motives. Every one of us wants better for students. We want better for our own children. We want better for our communities and our country. We won't solve any problems through finger-pointing.

I also don't intend to criticize the goals of previous administrations' education initiatives. In the end, every administration has tried to improve education for students and grow the number who are learning valuable skills.

We should hope – no, we should commit – that we as a country will not rest until every single child has equal access to the quality education they deserve. Secretary Spellings was right to ask “whose child do you want to leave behind?”

But the question remains: why, after all the good intentions, the worthwhile goals, the wealth of expertise mustered, and the billions and billions of dollars spent, are students still unprepared?

With No Child Left Behind, the general consensus among federal policymakers was that greater accountability would lead to better schools. Highlighting America's education woes had become an American pastime, and, they thought, surely if schools were forced to answer for their failures, students would ultimately be better off.

President Bush, the “compassionate conservative,” and Senator Kennedy, the “liberal lion,” both worked together on the law. It said that schools had to meet ambitious goals... or else. Lawmakers mandated that 100 percent of students attain proficiency by 2014. This approach would keep schools accountable and ultimately graduate more and better-educated students, they believed.

Turns out, it didn't. Indeed, as has been detailed today, NCLB did little to spark higher scores. Universal proficiency, touted at the law's passage, was not achieved. As states and districts scrambled to avoid the law's sanctions and maintain their federal funding, some resorted to focusing specifically on math and reading at the expense of other subjects. Others simply inflated scores or lowered standards.

The trend line remains troubling today. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress data, two-thirds of American fourth graders still can't read at the level they should. And since 2013, our 8th grade reading scores have declined.

Where the Bush administration emphasized NCLB's stick, the Obama administration focused on carrots. They recognized that states would not be able to legitimately meet the NCLB's strict standards. Secretary Duncan testified that 82 percent of the nation's schools would likely fail to meet the law's requirements -- thus subjecting them to crippling sanctions.

The Obama administration dangled billions of dollars through the “Race to the Top” competition, and the grant-making process not so subtly encouraged states to adopt the Common Core State Standards. With a price tag of nearly four and a half billion dollars, it was billed as the “largest-ever federal investment in school reform.” Later, the Department would give states a waiver from NCLB's requirements so long as they adopted the Obama administration's preferred policies — essentially making law while Congress negotiated the reauthorization of ESEA.

Unsurprisingly, nearly every state accepted Common Core standards and applied for hundreds of millions of dollars in “Race to the Top” funds. But despite this change, the United States' PISA performance did not improve in reading and science, and it dropped in math from 2012 to 2015.

Then, rightly, came the public backlash to federally imposed tests and the Common Core. I agree – and have always agreed – with President Trump on this: “Common Core is a disaster.” And at the U.S. Department of Education, Common Core is dead.

On a parallel track, the Obama administration's School Improvement Grants sought to fix targeted schools by injecting them with cash. The total cost of that effort was seven billion dollars.

One year ago this week, the Department's Institute of Education Sciences released a report

on what came of all that spending. It said: “Overall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment.”

There we have it: billions of dollars directed at low-performing schools had no significant impact on student achievement.

These investments were meant to spark meaningful reforms. Schools were encouraged to significantly alter their teaching staffs, fire the principal or change the structure and model of the school. But most glossed over those recommendations. They simply took the federal money and ran the school the same old way.

So where does that leave us? We saw two presidents from different political parties and philosophies take two different approaches.

Federally mandated assessments. Federal money. Federal standards. All originated in Washington, and none solved the problem. Too many of America’s students are still unprepared.

Perhaps the lesson lies not in what made the approaches different, but in what made them the same: the federal government. Both approaches had the same Washington “experts” telling educators how to behave.

The lesson is in the false premise: that Washington knows what’s best for educators, parents and students.

Rick, you’ve rightly pointed out that the federal government is good at making states, districts, and schools do something, but it’s not good at making them do it well. Getting real results for students hinges on how that “something” is done.

That’s because when it comes to education – and any other issue in public life – those closest to the problem are always better able to solve it. Washington bureaucrats and self-styled education “experts” are about as far removed from students as you can get.

Yet under both Republican and Democratic administrations, Washington overextended itself time and time again.

Educators don’t need engineering from Washington. Parents don’t need prescriptions from Washington. Students don’t need standards from Washington.

Throughout both initiatives, the result was a further damaged classroom dynamic between teacher and student, as the focus shifted from comprehension to test-passing. This sadly has taken root, with the American Federation of Teachers recently finding that 60 percent of its teachers reported having moderate to no influence over the content and skills taught in their

own classrooms.

Let that sink in. Most teachers feel they have little – if any -- say in their own classrooms.

That statistic should shock even the most ardent sycophant of “the system.” It’s yet another reason why we should shift power over classrooms from Washington back to teachers who know their students well.

Federal mandates distort what education ought to be: a trusting relationship between teacher, parent and student.

Ideally, parent and teacher work together to help a child discover his or her potential and pursue his or her passions. When we seek to empower teachers, we must empower parents as well. Parents are too often powerless in deciding what’s best for their child. The state mandates where to send their child. It mandates what their child learns and how he or she learns it. In the same way, educators are constrained by state mandates. District mandates. Building mandates... all kinds of other mandates! Educators don’t need Washington mandating their teaching on top of everything else.

But during the years covered in your volume, the focus was the opposite: more federal government intrusion into relationships between teachers, parents and children.

The lessons of history should force us to admit that federal action has its limits.

The federal-first approach did not start with No Child Left Behind. The push for higher national standards was present in the Clinton administration’s “Goals 2000” initiative. Before that, we had President George H.W. Bush’s “America 2000,” also calling for higher national standards. These followed the Reagan administration’s “Nation at Risk” report, released in 1983. That report gave dire warnings about the country’s track if education was not reformed. “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today,” the report warned, “we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” That came after President Carter’s giant nod to union bosses: the establishment of the Department of Education, with the ironic charge to “prohibit federal control of education.”

The trend is evident. Politicians from both parties just can’t help themselves. They have talked about painting education in new colors and even broader strokes. But each time, reform has not fundamentally changed “the system.” Each attempt has really just been a new coat of paint on the same old wall.

When we try the same thing over and over again, yet expect different results, that’s not reform – that’s insanity.

We will not reach our goal of helping every child achieve his or her fullest potential until we

truly change. Let me offer three ways we can move forward in that pursuit.

First, we need to recognize that the federal government's appropriate role is not to be the nation's school board. My role is not to be the national superintendent nor the country's "choice chief" – regardless of what the union's "Chicken Littles" may say! Federal investments in education, after all, are less than 10 percent of total K-12 expenditures, but the burdens created by federal regulations in education amount to a much, much larger percentage.

The Every Student Succeeds Act charted a path in a new direction. ESSA takes important steps to return power where it belongs by recognizing states – not Washington -- should shape education policy around their own people. But state lawmakers should also resist the urge to centrally plan education. "Leave it to the states" may be a compelling campaign-season slogan, but state capitols aren't exactly close to every family either. That's why states should empower teachers and parents and provide the same flexibility ESSA allows states.

But let's recognize that many states are now struggling with what comes next. State ESSA plans aren't the finish line. Those words on paper mean very little if state and local leaders don't seize the opportunity to truly transform education. They must move past a mindset of compliance and embrace individual empowerment.

Under ESSA, school leaders, educators and parents have the latitude and freedom to try new approaches to serve individual students.

My message to them is simple: do it!

Embrace the imperative to do something truly bold... to challenge the status quo... to break the mold.

One important way to start this process is to make sure that parents get the information they want and need about the performance of their children's schools and teachers. ESSA encourages states to be transparent about how money is spent, down to the school-building level.

Some states have developed information that is truly useful for parents and teachers. Others have worked just as hard to obfuscate what is really going on at their schools. To empower parents, policymakers and teachers, we can't let "the system" hide behind complexity to escape accountability.

We must always push for better.

ESSA is a good step in the right direction. But it's just that – a step. We still find ourselves boxed in a "system," one where we are in a constant battle to move the ball between the 40-yard lines of a football field. Nobody scores, and nobody wins. Students are left bored in the

bleachers, and many leave, never to return.

So why don't we consider whether we need a new playbook?

That brings me to point number two. And, to finish the analogy... let's call a new play: empowering parents.

Parents have the greatest stake in the outcome of their child's education. Accordingly, they should also have the power to make sure their child is getting the right education.

As Deven Carlson points out, there is little constituency in America for the top-down reforms that have been tried time and again. In order for any reform to truly work, it must attract and maintain the support of the people.

I have seen such support for parental empowerment. The more parents exercise it, the more they like it. This growing support is why states are responding to that demand one by one. It's also why sycophants entrenched in and defending the status quo are terrified. They recoil from relinquishing power and control to teachers, parents and students.

Well, I'm not one bit afraid of losing power. Because I trust parents and teachers, and I believe in students.

Equal access to a quality education should be a right for every American and every parent should have the right to choose how their child is educated. Government exists to protect those rights, not usurp them.

So let's face it: the opponents of parents could repeal every voucher law, close every charter school, and defund every choice program across the country.

But school choice still wouldn't go away. There would still be school choices... for the affluent and the powerful.

Let's empower the forgotten parents to decide where their children go to school. Let's show some humility and trust all parents to know their kids' needs better than we do.

Let's trust teachers, too. Let's encourage them to innovate, to create new options for students. Not just with public charter schools or magnet schools or private schools, but within the traditional "system" and with new approaches yet to be explored.

What we've been doing isn't serving all kids well. Let's unleash teachers to help solve the problem.

You know, I've never heard it claimed that giving parents more options is bad for mom and dad. Or for the child. What you hear is that it's bad for "the system" – for the school building, the school system, the funding stream.



That argument speaks volumes about where Chicken Little's priorities lie.

Our children deserve better than the 19th century assembly-line approach. They deserve learning environments that are agile, relevant, exciting. Every student deserves a customized, self-paced, and challenging life-long learning journey. Schools should be open to all students – no matter where they're growing up or how much their parents make.

That means no more discrimination based upon zip code or socio-economic status. All means all.

It's about educational freedom! Freedom from Washington mandates. Freedom from centralized control. Freedom from a one-size-fits-all mentality. Freedom from "the system."

Choice in education is not when a student picks a different classroom in this building or that building, uses this voucher or that tax-credit scholarship. Choice in education is bigger than that. Those are just mechanisms.

It's about freedom to learn. Freedom to learn differently. Freedom to explore. Freedom to fail, to learn from falling and to get back up and try again. It's freedom to find the best way to learn and grow... to find the exciting and engaging combination that unlocks individual potential.

Which leads to my final point: if America's students are to be prepared, we must rethink school.

What I propose is not another top-down, federal government policy that promises to be a silver bullet. No. We need a paradigm shift, a fundamental reorientation... a rethink.

"Rethink" means we question everything to ensure nothing limits a student from pursuing his or her passion, and achieving his or her potential. So each student is prepared at every turn for what comes next.

It's past time to ask some of the questions that often get labeled as "non-negotiable" or just don't get asked at all:

Why do we group students by age?

Why do schools close for the summer?

Why must the school day start with the rise of the sun?

Why are schools assigned by your address?

Why do students have to go to a school building in the first place?

Why is choice only available to those who can buy their way out? Or buy their way in?

Why can't a student learn at his or her own pace?

Why isn't technology more widely embraced in schools?

Why do we limit what a student can learn based upon the faculty and facilities available?

Why?

We must answer these questions. We must acknowledge what is and what is not working for students.

Now, I don't have all the answers or policy prescriptions. No one person does. But people do know how to help their neighbors. People do know how they can help a dozen students here or 100 there. Because they know the students. They know their home lives. They know their communities. They know their parents. They know each other.

That means learning can, should, and will look different for each unique child. And we should celebrate that, not fear it!

I'm well aware that change -- the unknown -- can be scary. That talk of fundamentally rethinking our approach to education seems impossible, insurmountable.

But not changing is scarier. Stagnation creates risks of its own. The reality is...

we should be horrified of not changing.

Our children don't fear their futures. Think of a newborn, born into hope -- not fear. They begin life with a clean slate. With a fresh set of eyes to see things we don't currently see. That's how students begin their lifelong learning journeys... with unlimited potential... yet with limited time.

Their dreams, their hopes, their aspirations, their futures can't wait, while another wave of lawmakers puts yet another coat of paint on the broken "system." One year may not seem like much to an adult, but it's much too long for the child who still can't read "Goodnight Moon."

We, the public, can't wait either. Education is good for the public.

Everything else -- our health, our economy, our continued security as a nation -- depends on what we do today for the leaders of tomorrow. It follows, then, that any educator in any learning environment serves the public good. If the purpose of public education is to educate the public, then it should... not... matter what word comes before school.

What matters are the students the school serves. What matters are their futures. We've been entrusted with their futures not because we asked to be, but because it's a duty to destiny -- theirs... and ours. It all depends on what we do now.

When our grandchildren tell their children about this moment in history, let them say we were the ones who finally put students first.

Thank you, and I look forward to this conversation.

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